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published in
Studies in Reformed Theology
2009

document version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

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citation for published version (APA)
van den Brink, G. (2009). Trinitarian Ecclesiology and the Search for Unity. A Reformed Reading of Miroslav Volf. *Studies in Reformed Theology*, 18, 313-325.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

TRINITARIAN ECCLESIOLOGY AND THE SEARCH FOR UNITY A REFORMED READING OF MIROSLAV VOLF

Gijsbert van den Brink

Introduction

The recent worldwide revival of interest among Christian theologians in the doctrine of the Trinity has had important consequences for other parts of theology. Rather than considering the doctrine of the Trinity as an isolated *locus*, many voices plead for a rephrasing of “the whole network of Christian doctrine (...) in a Trinitarian way.”¹ By ascribing a methodological function to the doctrine of the Trinity for the elaboration of all classical doctrinal topics (and even for other areas of Christian reflection, such as dialogue with the natural sciences), they advocate the development of a fully Trinitarian theology. In this vein, the significance of the doctrine of the Trinity for, e.g., the doctrine of creation, has been examined, but also its possible influence on theological anthropology, the person and work of Christ, eschatology, the theology of religions, etc.

It does not come as a surprise, therefore, that the implications of the doctrine of the Trinity for *ecclesiology* should also become the subject of intense reflection and debate in Christian theology. Indeed, such a debate has been taking place in recent years, and an important landmark in it is Miroslav Volf’s monograph, *After Our Likeness*.² This

¹ A.I. McFadyen, “The Trinity and Human Individuality. The Condition of Relevance,” *Theology* 95 (1992), 10. Quoted in Richard M. Fermer, “The Limits of Trinitarian Theology as a Methodological Paradigm,” *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 41 (1999), 159.

² Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness. The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998). In a recent volume that traces the possible influence of the Trinitarian renaissance on the various *loci* of the classical dogmatic scheme, the chapter on ecclesiology consists of a core part from *After Our Likeness*. See Paul Louis Metzger (ed.), *Trinitarian Soundings in Systematic Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2005), 153–74.

book is an attempt to develop a free church ecclesiology that transcends the individualism that is so characteristic in the free church tradition by means of a critical reading of Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox ecclesiologies. Meanwhile, Volf has become a member of an Episcopalian church in the USA. Since this personal move does not necessarily imply that Volf no longer adopts the ecclesiological position he unfolds in *After Our Likeness*, I will limit myself to the argument of this book and especially focus on its implications for the unity of the church.

The Trinity and the Church

Volf does not take the doctrine of the Trinity as the sole starting point of his ecclesiology. On the contrary, in line with free church tradition, an important point of departure is one of a Christological nature: constitutive for the church is the gathering of believers in the name of Christ. Matthew 18:20, a text which has always been popular for undergirding a low church ecclesiology (from John Smyth onwards), is a key biblical text in this connection, also for Volf.³ The church does not have anything to do with buildings or bishops or with preachers or parishes in the first place, but with a community of worshipping people. The church is, first of all, an assembled community. It is an assembly of faithful people coming together (wherever and whenever) in the name of the Lord. So, “the church is the church of Jesus Christ...or it is not a church at all.”⁴ The phrase ‘in the name of the Lord’ means that the goal of their coming together is to worship Christ as Savior, to bear witness to him, and to profess faith in him as their Lord and the Lord of the entire world. So the church as a congregation assembled in the name of Christ presupposes the faith and commitment of those who gather together.⁵ Volf acknowledges that one can question from an exegetical point of view whether the “two or three” from Matthew 18: 20 coincides with the *ekklesia* (“if he refuses to listen to them [viz. the two or three], tell it to the church,” vs. 17, suggests otherwise), but he argues that an overall reading of the New Testament makes it

³ Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 136.

⁴ Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 146.

⁵ Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 147.

plausible to consider Matt. 18:20 theologically as a statement about the church. So wherever such meetings are being held, we encounter the 'church' in the full sense of the word. In this way, Volf firmly roots his ecclesiological thought in the free church tradition, with its typical emphasis on the individual choice of people who have already come to be believers.

To be sure, Volf recognizes that Christ does not promise his presence to individual persons, but to the assembling community. So the relation between Christ and the individual believer is mediated by the church. This is what becomes clear from the sacraments: nobody can administer the sacraments to him- or herself (John Smyth's decision to baptize himself is characterized by Volf as "unfortunate"),⁶ whereas the sacraments have to be received personally.⁷ But in this connection, Volf warns against the view that in administering the sacraments the church would distribute the salvific grace of God. For again, following Luther and Calvin, Volf argues that the sacraments presuppose faith. "There is no church without sacraments; but there are no sacraments without... faith."⁸ Therefore, individual faith remains a constitutive category for the church. It is not as though it were a human activity; Volf emphatically argues that faith is a gift of God through the Spirit. But then God is indeed the sole subject of salvation—not the church. Although one does receive faith through the church, one does not receive it from the church.⁹

In this way Volf remains firmly in touch with the Protestant tradition (especially its congregational variety). However, he tries to bring this tradition into closer relation with more communion centered ecclesiologies, both from a Roman Catholic and from an Orthodox background. Volf is deeply convinced of the need to do this, given the fact that all religious traditions have to face the consumer mentality of modern society. "In a culture resembling a warehouse, where a person can take whatever he or she wants, religion too must become a 'commodity'..."¹⁰ Therefore Volf attempts to counter this (post)modern tendency towards individualism, which is also deeply inherent in his

⁶ Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 153.

⁷ Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 163.

⁸ Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 154.

⁹ Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 166.

¹⁰ Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 14.

own tradition, by using the doctrine of the Trinity as a model or mirror for ecclesiology. Of course, he is not the first one to do so,¹¹ but he does it in a very well-considered and elaborate way, distinguishing carefully between the possibilities and the limits of the analogy. As to the possibility (and legitimacy), he puts forward three arguments.

First, ever since Parmenides, Western philosophy is largely characterized by an infertile dialectic between oneness and plurality—a dichotomy between unification and pluralization. In our thinking about God, humanity, and the world, and so, also in our thinking about church unity and plurality, communion, and persons should be kept in balance. According to Volf, “[t]o think consistently in Trinitarian terms means to escape this dichotomy.”¹² The triune God is the ground of both unity and multiplicity. Although the impact of the way we think about God on other domains of our thinking should not be over-estimated, “ecclesial and social reality on the one hand, and Trinitarian models on the other are mutually determinative.”¹³ The second argument is theological rather than philosophical: Entrance in the Christian church takes place through baptism, and baptism is by definition a Trinitarian event. Through baptism believers are initiated both into the Trinitarian community of God and into the ecclesial community. Now “[i]f Christian initiation is a Trinitarian event, then the church must speak of the Trinity as its determining reality.”¹⁴ Volf grounds this conclusion not only in the famous passage in Matthew 28 where Jesus commands his disciples to baptize the nations in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit, but more generally in the way in which the New Testament (especially in its triadic texts) relates the divine community and the community of believers to each other (John 17:21; 1 Cor. 12:4–6; Eph. 4:4–6). The communion of the church with the triune God implies a more than formal correspondence between Trinity and church. And relations between the many in the church should mirror the mutual love and equality of the divine persons. Volf’s third argument for using the doctrine of the Trinity as a model

¹¹ Cf. e.g. Colin Gunton, “The Church on Earth: The Roots of Community,” in Colin Gunton & Daniel W. Hardy (eds.), *On Being the Church: Essays on the Christian Community* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1989), 48–80.

¹² Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 193. Remarkably, Volf does not mention Colin Gunton’s masterful analysis of this dialectic in his *The One, the Three and the Many. God, Creation and the Culture of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

¹³ Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 194.

¹⁴ Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 195.

for ecclesiology consists in an appeal to the Christian tradition. Origen already argued that the church is full of the holy Trinity. And Cyprian described the church as “the people united in one in the unity of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”¹⁵

At the same time, Volf is (I think more than some others) sensitive to the limits of the analogy between the Trinity and the church. He makes two important qualifications. First of all, Volf concurs with Erik Peterson that the mystery of the Trinity can only be found in God and not in creation. Theology and anthropology cannot be reduced to each other. The this worldly character of God’s *revelation*, however, which “aims at the indwelling of the triune God in the world”¹⁶ enables us to convert Trinitarian ideas into ecclesiological ones.¹⁷ Although there is no identity between both, there certainly is an analogy. Second, there is a difference between our broken, historical situation as Christians now, and our eschatological future. So, apart from the theological proviso, there is also an eschatological proviso. Because the church is still on its way as a sojourning people, her correspondence with the perfect Trinitarian community in God is imperfect. However, “[t]he eschatologically relevant question is how the church is to correspond to the Trinity *within history*.”¹⁸

One may question whether Volf’s analysis of the limits of the ecclesiological use of Trinitarian doctrine is critical enough. Paul Fiddes has argued in relation to Trinitarian language that its point “is not to provide an example to copy, but to draw us into participation in God, out of which our human life can be transformed.”¹⁹ As long as we consider our view of God an example that we humans should copy, these copies will at best remain imperfect, and at worst become perverted. According to Fiddes, it is only when we are brought into communion with God that the Spirit of God can transform our hearts and attitudes, and

¹⁵ Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 195–96. Origen, *Selecta in Psalmos*, PG 12.1265B; Cyprian, Treatise IV, “On the Lord’s Prayer,” IV, 23; *Ante-Nicene Fathers* 5, 454. Volf also mentions Tertullian, who viewed the community assembling in the name of Christ as an image of the Trinity (197). Cf. Anne Hunt, “The Trinity and the Church,” *Irish Theological Quarterly* 70 (2005), 217.

¹⁶ Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 192.

¹⁷ Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 198.

¹⁸ Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 200 (italics by Volf).

¹⁹ Paul S. Fiddes, *Participating in God. A Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2000), 66 (see also 28–29).

gradually reshape us according to God's image.²⁰ Our views of God need not be like adequate pictures, which is, after all, impossible as long as we are *in via* rather than *in patria*, but should rather conduct us into the nearness of God. That is why they must be Trinitarian in character. That is: they should draw on the biblical narrative about Jesus, and account for the fact that, as Christians, we only come into contact with God through the Spirit of Jesus, God's final and perfect image, who is one with the Father. Clearly, however, Volf would agree with Fiddes's criticism of imitation language and with his preference for participation language.²¹ For only when by personal faith we have communion with God in Christ through the Spirit does it become possible that our way of being the church is gradually transformed into the likeness of the divine communion (cf. 1 Cor. 3:18).²²

Persons and Communion

After these preparatory considerations, we can now examine the way in which Volf relates the doctrine of the Trinity to ecclesiology. What kind of church do we get when we start our theological reflection about the church from the doctrine of the Trinity? Volf develops his own view here in discussion with important representatives of the Roman Catholic as well as the Eastern Orthodox tradition; namely, Joseph Ratzinger (the present Pope Benedict XVI) and John Zizioulas, titular bishop of Pergamon, and sometime professor at St. Vladimir's Seminary in New York. Volf shows how in the work of both theologians, Western and Eastern varieties, respectively, of the doctrine of the Trinity correspond to a specific view of the church.

It is true that Ratzinger, to start with him, considers the oneness and the threeness of God as equally important ("equiprimal"),²³ but in fact his Trinitarian thinking starts from the divine unity. Ratzinger sees the persons of Father, Son, and Spirit as relations within this

²⁰ For a sketch of how this transformation can be conceived of (and how theological and psychological categories are intertwined in it), see William P. Alston, "The Indwelling of the Holy Spirit," in William P. Alston, *Divine Nature and Human Language* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 223–52.

²¹ Cf. Volf, *After Our Likeness*, e.g., 212–13.

²² See also on this point, as well as on many others in this paper, the illuminating contribution of Christiaan Mostert to the present volume.

²³ Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 201.

fundamental substantial unity. Similarly, in his ecclesiology, the one universal church is constitutive for the many local churches. To be sure, these local churches resemble the perichoretic community of the divine persons in that they are intensely involved with each other. But these local churches can only exist from and toward the universal church—as represented, we may suppose, by the Church of Rome. “Local churches are churches precisely in their relation to the whole.”²⁴ In both cases—God and the church—it is the unity that grounds and sustains the plurality. As in Augustine’s doctrine of the Trinity which so heavily influenced the Western tradition, the persons in God coincide with the intra-Trinitarian relations, so that they scarcely have an ontological substratum,²⁵ and as a result of which the *opera ad extra indivisa sunt*, i.e., God operates as a single subject towards the world. Translated into ecclesiological categories this means that the universal church dominates and to some extent even absorbs the local churches.

Like Moltmann and many (but not all!) other contemporary theologians, Volf sees a clear distinction between Western and Eastern conceptions of the Trinity. John Zizioulas is an important representative of the latter. According to him, in our thinking about the divine Trinity, we must (like the Cappadocian fathers) start from the concept of the *person*. It is the three persons who together constitute the one being of God. Therefore, the notion of the one divine substance is not ontologically prior to the concept of the person. It is rather the other way around because the divine substance exists only as persons. The real being of God is not somewhere behind or beyond the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, but precisely *in* the mutual communion of these three persons. Continuing another eastern line of thought in this connection. However, Zizioulas, at the same time, ascribes ontological primacy to the Father, who is seen as the *archè* or cause of the divine existence, the source of the Trinity.²⁶ The ecclesiological counterpart of this view of the Trinity is as follows. First, there is no universal church behind or beyond the many local churches. Instead, these local churches themselves *constitute* the universal church. Every local

²⁴ Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 201.

²⁵ Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 71.

²⁶ Cf. e.g. his essay “The Doctrine of the Holy Trinity. The Significance of the Cappadocian Contribution,” in Christoph Schwöbel (ed.), *Trinitarian Theology Today* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), 51–52.

church is the totality of the universal church at this particular place. Second, a prerequisite of being an instantiation of the church in this way is that the local church is open to ecclesial community with other local churches, realizing that it is impossible to represent the universal church on your own. Third, it is the figure of the bishop who mirrors in the church the primary position of the Father as the *archè* of the Trinity. So, although Zizioulas claims to have excluded “all pyramidal notions” from ecclesiology, at the same time he legitimizes hierarchical structures in the church, with bishops exerting authority over the community.²⁷ Although the bishop is conditioned by the community (as the Father is in a sense conditioned by the Son), he himself constitutes the congregation: “[T]he oneness of the bishop in each local church is a *sine qua non condition* for the catholicity of this church.”²⁸

Now Volf agrees with Zizioulas on the second point, but differs from him with regard to the first and third one. That is, he argues, against the pre-eminence of the figure of the bishop, given the principal equality of all believers that mirrors the equality of divine persons. However, he agrees with Zizioulas that in looking for correspondence between the Trinity and the church, one should not take as a point of departure the relationship between the one divine nature and the three divine persons; for if every local church is identical with the one universal church and if the universal church corresponds to the divine nature, then each divine person is identical to the divine nature, which would mean that the divine persons cannot be distinguished from one another anymore. Therefore, like Moltmann and Pannenberg, Volf opts for a perichoretic understanding of God’s unity: Father, Son, and Spirit mutually permeate and indwell each other, but in doing so, they do not cease to be different persons.²⁹ The counterpart of this in ecclesiology is, indeed, a close relationship and inter-connectedness in and between local churches.

Volf is keen, however, to remind us of his two provisos. In a strict sense, there can be no correspondence between the perichoretic unity of God and ecclesial unity because human subjects are by definition

²⁷ John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion. Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1985), 183; cf. Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 112.

²⁸ Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 115; quoting John Zizioulas, “The Bishop in the Theological Doctrine of the Orthodox Church,” *Kanon* 7 (1985), 30–31.

²⁹ Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 209.

external rather than internal to each other. Moreover, whereas the Trinitarian community is a perfect communion of love, the ecclesial community, as long as it still awaits its eschatological consummation, is not. Only in the eschaton will it fully participate in the divine unity.³⁰ In its broken and transient historical constellation, we have to account for the possibility of people being abused by each other, as long as we do not (yet), like God, live in perfect love. This is why in ecclesiology talk of mutual love is not enough, but in the church we must also be held together by a covenant with mutual rights.³¹ As long as we live “on this side of God’s new creation,”³² we are not just a communion of love but also a communion of the will. In this connection, Volf criticizes Zizioulas for presenting an “over-realized eschatology,” which ignores the present-day earthly reality of sin and unredemption.³³

Having said this, Volf agrees with Zizioulas that the intra-Trinitarian relationships should shape ecclesial relations already now (and not only in the eschatological future). In elaborating this analogy, Volf starts with *intra*-ecclesial relationships, in other words, the internal relationships between the members of a single church. Only when individual believers participate in the Spirit of God who dwells in the community can this community correspond to the Trinity. “...the unity of the church is grounded in the interiority of the Spirit...in Christians.”³⁴ Next, the perichoresis of the divine persons also has *inter*-ecclesial relevance. Like the divine persons, different churches have different identifying characteristics, by means of which they should enrich one another.³⁵ When the Trinity is a community open to others,³⁶ different churches cannot live in separation and isolation from each other. “I suggest taking the openness of every church toward all other churches as an indispensable condition of ecclesiality.”³⁷ For the identity of local churches is co-determined by their relations with other churches, in the same way as the identity of the Son is determined by his relations with the Father and the Spirit, etc. So, from a theological point of view

³⁰ John 17.

³¹ Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 207, 220.

³² Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 220.

³³ Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 201.

³⁴ Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 213.

³⁵ Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 213.

³⁶ John 17.

³⁷ Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 156.

local churches cannot be closed systems to each other; rather, they become catholic only insofar as they open up to each other.

In this way, Volf tries to enrich his own free church ecclesiology by giving proper attention from a Trinitarian perspective to classical *nota ecclesiae*, such as the unity and catholicity of the church.

Some Critical Reflections

It will not come as a surprise that critical appropriations of Volf's proposal for a Trinitarian ecclesiological differ according to the background of those who engage with his views. From a Roman Catholic point of view, Volf's rendering of Ratzinger's ecclesiology has been criticized. It has been argued that Ratzinger's Trinitarian conception of the church is less static and directed towards uniformity than Volf suggests.³⁸ On the other hand, Volf's exegetical arguments for the view that the Pauline metaphor of the church as the body of Christ does not imply institutional church unity have been characterized as "so weak that they do not merit comprehensive discussion."³⁹

From a more liberal perspective, Dutch theologian Kees de Groot critiques Volf's near identification of the church with the assembling community, arguing that it is also possible to belong to the church in less committed ways. Consciously or not, Volf's congregationalist definition of what it is to be a church excludes many people who want to be related more loosely to the assembling community. In this connection, De Groot refers to the "service model" of the church for an alternative: adapting itself to the postmodern situation, the church has to be a spiritual room, a service institute that facilitates solidarity (*verbondenheid*) by addressing the spiritual desires of individual believers with all their ambivalences.⁴⁰ Personally, I am inclined to side with Volf in this discussion. It is true that in the church we can tolerate the

³⁸ Ralph Del Colle, "Communion and Trinity: The Free Church Ecclesiology of Miroslav Volf—A Catholic Response," *Pneuma. The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies* 22 (2000), 303–27.

³⁹ Marcel Sarot, "Trinity and Church. Trinitarian Perspectives on the Identity of the Christian Communion," a paper delivered at the Annual Conference of the Society for the Study of Theology, Soesterberg (the Netherlands), 1 April 2009, 7 (footnote 27).

⁴⁰ Kees de Groot, "'Wij zijn de kerk!' Maar wie zijn wij? In discussie met het congregationalisme" ('We Are the Church!' But Who Are We? A Discussion with Congregationalism), *Collationes* 36 (2006), 303–20 (313–14).

lack of involvement of many members. But it is something else to *justify* such a lack of involvement by giving it a theological legitimation. As Volf holds, it is the worshipping community, seeking to let itself be transformed by the Word and work of the triune God, that constitutes the church. Without such a committed community, the church (including any services it delivers) would soon vanish. Therefore, it seems to me that the gathering community is, indeed, a proper starting point for ecclesiological reflection.

Further, Canadian theologian Nicholas Jesson criticizes Volf for not being consistent in his approach in that he builds his Trinitarian ecclesiology on a Christological substructure. By starting from the ideal of a church consisting of individual believers who choose to gather in the name of Christ, Volf in fact justifies the individualism and consumer mentality which he seeks to overcome. Because he does not think in a Trinitarian way (i.e., in communal terms) about the church from the very beginning, one may wonder whether his subsequent Trinitarian approach can still counter the individualist tendency which is inherent in his free church starting point. Jesson suggests that a more positive valuation of Zizioulas' Orthodox Trinitarian ecclesiology would remedy this defect.⁴¹

From a Reformed point of view, finally, I think that Volf has given us an impressive example of how to do ecclesiology without renouncing one's own tradition, but also without absolutizing it. Volf seriously wants to learn from the more community based ecclesiologies that reign in other traditions. At the same time and in line with Reformed theology, he makes a case for the pivotal importance of personal faith and public confession for the life of the church. Indeed, the church is not an institute on its own, i.e., separate from individual believers, but 'we are the church.' The Spirit does not indwell the church apart from indwelling individual believers.

Nevertheless, it seems to me that Volf's emphasis on the church as basically a believers' church aggravates the contemporary problems of extreme individualism in religious affairs and the rise of a religious consumer mentality instead of helping to solve them. The way out here, however, should not necessarily be found in a more positive

⁴¹ Nicholas Jesson, "Where Two or Three Are Gathered. Miroslav Volf's Free Church Ecclesiology" (paper University of Toronto, 2003), www.ecumenism.net/archive/jesson_volf.pdf (last visited 30 March 2009).

evaluation of Eastern Orthodox ecclesiology, which as Volf rightly shows, has some unconvincing and unhelpful ramifications. Instead, Volf could have taken his own biblical-theological argument for a Trinitarian approach of ecclesiology more seriously. For if it is through baptism that human beings are being drawn into both the Trinitarian and the ecclesial community, then baptism must be a cornerstone of our ecclesiology. According to Reformed intuitions, it is baptism as a sign of the *covenant of God* with his people, rather than personal faith, that should be considered constitutive for the being of the church. Even when someone no longer joins the regular worship services, as long as one is baptized one belongs in a sense to the church and should not be excluded from the ecclesial community because one still belongs to the covenant of God. In this way, we take the unity of the church more seriously than by limiting the church to those believers who are actively involved.

Significantly, the concept of covenant does play a (minor) role in Volf's ecclesiology. Following John Smyth (1570–1612), however, he describes it as a purely human category.⁴² In line with the principle 'where two or three gather,' Smyth considered the covenant as a "vowe, promise, oath"⁴³ by means of which believers join together with God and with themselves. Even when the divine initiative in making the covenant is acknowledged, the full emphasis is on the human obligation to fulfil the conditions of the covenant.⁴⁴ It seems to me that here another Protestant alternative than Volf's is preferable, viz. one that starts from God's initiative in making the covenant and from God's faithfulness to it. This is not to belittle the importance of the notion of personal faith as it figures so prominently in Volf's ecclesiology. The covenant of God as signified in baptism is not a mode of infused grace, but asks for a personal response to the calling of the triune God in a life characterized by faith and conversion. Precisely in the atmosphere and context of the church, however, such a response can gradually take shape. But as long as this response fails to appear, this is a reason for embrace rather than for exclusion—to paraphrase another title of

⁴² Volf, *After Our Likeness*, e.g., 207, 277.

⁴³ W.T. Whitley (ed.), *The Works of John Smyth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1915), 254; quoted by Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 175.

⁴⁴ Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 175–76.

Volf.⁴⁵ Here, too, we have to make an eschatological proviso. As an ecclesial community in our broken historical context, we are not yet what we will be: a community consisting only of perfected saints. Nevertheless, we keep striving and do our utmost to reach what is ahead.⁴⁶ This is the space, as well as the field of tension, within which our life as a church is enacted.

All in all, Volf has made clear that in ecumenical discussions about the unity and diversity of the church, high church ecclesiologies of a Roman Catholic or Orthodox brand are not the only partners in town. A Protestant ecclesiological view, such as Volf's, that is open to learning from other traditions, but at the same time puts the strong points of its own tradition on the table, should be taken with equal seriousness—especially when its still individualistic overtones are counterbalanced by an anchoring of ecclesiology in the Reformed doctrine of the covenant of the triune God.

⁴⁵ Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace. A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996).

⁴⁶ Phil. 3:12f.

